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A Note on the ὄλισβος

By MAX NELSON, Vancouver

Summary. The term ὄλισβος likely did not univocally refer to a dildo, nor was it the *vox propria* for the implement in ancient Greek. It seems to have meant “slider”, and to have originally referred to a type of musical instrument slid along strings. Like the word *πλήκτρον* (“striker”) it subsequently came to designate the dildo, probably simply as a coinage of Cratinus which was later borrowed by Aristophanes. A number of other terms were used to designate the dildo in ancient Greek.

In scholia of Aristophanes (*in Ar. Lys.* 109–110) and in ancient lexica (*Suda* s.v. ὄλισβος and Phot., *Lex.* s. v. ὀλίμβοι) the word ὄλισβος is said to mean “leather penis” (αἰδοῖον δερμάτινον). As if this definition were not clear enough, certain early modern scholars, refusing to accept any sexual implications, believed (or at least pretended to believe) the ὄλισβος to be a pessary (or vaginal suppository)¹. In 1810, however, in a short pamphlet, the pseudonymous Brother Saufejus ab Amphoris, having exhorted scholars to set aside modern pudency, boldly clarified the true use of this leather penis as a dildo (though he also confused it with the costume penis of Old Comedy)². Since then scholars have generally assumed that ὄλισβος univocally meant “dildo”, and that in fact it was the *vox propria* for the implement³. I propose to demonstrate that both of these assumptions are incorrect.

In 1951, Edgar Lobel published for the first time a very fragmentary poem in the Aeolic dialect, found on a third century A.D.

¹ See R. Priestley, et al., *Notae in Aristophanem* (London 1829) vol. 2, 341.

² S. ab Amphoris, *De Olisbo Comiorum Veteris Graeciae Instrumento* (Vervecum in patria 1810) esp. 10–20. The author seems to have been French, since at one point (17) he speaks of “our French” (*Galli nostrates*). The work is not very scholarly (all together only two passages of Aristophanes are cited: *Ar., Lys.* 109–110 and fr. 332.12–14 K.-A. [= Kassel-Austin]), and thus attribution to some important academic such as Jean François Boissonade de Fontarabie (1774–1857), who edited Aristophanes in 1826 and published a work on the author in 1832, seems unlikely.

³ See, for instance, among many others, A. Körte, “Olisbos”, *RE* XVII.2 (1937) 2480–2482.

papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (2291), which he tentatively assigned to Sappho (= fr. 99 Lobel-Page). In the fifth line of the first column he restored the reading *όλισβ-*, which he nevertheless admitted was “manifestly very improbable”⁴. On the other hand, in 1955, Denis Page recorded his opinion that the reading was “practically certain”, and that, though the only surviving letters were *δοκ*, the whole first word was to be reconstructed on metrical grounds as *όλισβοδόκοισι*⁵, the dative plural of the *hapax legomenon* **όλισβοδόκος*⁶. With this reconstruction the word presumably agrees with the *χόρδαισι* of the previous line, and thus the meaning would be “*όλισβος*-receiving” or “*όλισβος*-welcoming strings”⁷. For the sake of sense in the context Martin West suggested that “*όλισβος* was once a synonym of *πλήκτρον*”, though the word is not otherwise found with this meaning⁸. Giuseppe Giangrande, following Kenneth Dover, proposed instead that *όλισβος* should be translated in the same way as in the other instances of the word and thus that the phrase would read “the dildo-receiving strings”. He also suggested that by adjectival enallage the player of the strings was really being referred to. Giangrande even went so far as to say that this incontestably proved that Sappho was a lesbian, blatantly disregarding for one the fact that the poem could have been written by Alcaeus (it is assigned to him as fr. 303A by Eva-Maria Voigt), and, moreover, that even if it had been written by Sappho, and even if the reading *όλισβοδόκοισι* could be accepted without question, this need say nothing of Sappho’s own sexual

⁴ E. Lobel, ed., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri: Part XXI* (London 1951) 10–14, with quote from 13.

⁵ D. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford 1955) 145, n. (with a discussion of the remaining traces).

⁶ See G. Fatouros, *Index Verborum zur frühgriechischen Lyrik* (Heidelberg 1966) 275.

⁷ Numerous ancient Greek adjectives end in *-δόκος/-δόχος* (and nouns in *-δόκη/-δόχη*) from the verb *δέχομαι* or *δέκομαι*, and can mean “accepting x” ([*ἀ*]δωροδόκος = “[not] accepting gifts/bribes”), “receiving x” (*ιστοδόκη* = “mast receiver”), “containing x” (*έλαιοδόκος* = “containing oil”), “holding x” (*δουροδόκη* = “spear-holder”), “keeping x” (*σμηνοδόκος* = “bee-keeping”), “welcoming x” (*πολεμηδόκος* = “welcoming war”), or “waiting at x” (*πυληδόκος* = “waiting at the door”). For “receiving” here, see K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge 1989 [revised edition]) 176, n. 9, and J.M. Snyder, *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho* (New York 1997) 114 and 204; for “welcoming”, see D.A. Campbell, *Greek Lyrics I: Sappho and Alcaeus* (Cambridge, Mass. 1990) 125.

⁸ M.L. West, “Burning Sappho”, *Maia* 22 (1970) 307–330, at 324.

inclinations. Antonio Guarino, in a short note refuting Giangrande's cavalier claims, rightly pointed out that there is no reason to think that ὄλισβος was used univocally⁹.

West's identification of ὄλισβος with πλῆκτρον can be supported by examining the possible etymology of the word ὄλισβος, which none of the scholars mentioned so far have brought to bear on the question. Two quite attractive alternatives have been given for the philological roots of the word ὄλισβος. First, it has been usually accepted that the term is most likely derived, through the intermediate word ὄλισθος, from the verb ὀλισθεῖν or ὀλισθάνειν which comes from the Indo-European root *h₃sleǵdʰ-, and is thus equivalent to the English cognate verb "to slide"¹⁰. Pierre Chantraine further explained the suffix -βος in this case as categorizing the word as obscene on the model of such terms as κάληβος ("eunuch"), κωλαβός ("catamite"), and σάραβος ("female genitals")¹¹. Second, Maria Grazia Tibiletti Bruno proposed that the word ὄλισβος originated in south-west Asia Minor and came from the word ὀλίσβη (through the hypothetical intermediary *ἄλισβος) which is an Ionian term meaning "deceit" (ἀπάτη) according to Hesychius¹². Both of the proposed etymologies for ὄλισ-

⁹ G. Giangrande, "Sappho and the ὄλισβος", *Emerita* 48 (1980) 249–250, with A. Guarino, "Professorenerotismus", *Labeo* 27 (1981) 439–440, and Giangrande, "A che serviva l'olisbos' di Saffo?", *Labeo* 29 (1983) 154–155.

¹⁰ See, for instance, H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg 1961) vol. 2, pt. 1, 377, s. v. ὄλισβος (with references to previous scholarship), P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris 1968) 792, s. v. ὄλισβος (who does not patently prefer this etymology to the alternative), A. Dierichs, "Erotik in der Kunst Griechenlands", *Antike Welt*, suppl. 3–85 (1988) 66, J. Henderson, *Aristophanes: Lysistrata* (Oxford 1987) 81 (who notes the alternative as well) and *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*² (New York, Oxford 1991) 221–222, and E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*² (Berkeley 1993) 82. For Greek constructions from the *h₃sleǵdʰ- root, see E. P. Hamp, "ὀλισθάνω", *Glotta* 61 (1983) 192, and also H. Rix, *Lexikon der indogermanischen Verben*² (Wiesbaden 2001) 307 (*h₃ieǵsdʰ- < *h₃sleǵdʰ-).

¹¹ See P. Chantraine, *La formation des noms en grec ancien* (Paris 1933) 262 and *Dictionnaire étymologique* (note 10) 792, s. v. ὄλισβος. Perhaps it may not be far fetched to connect ὄλισβος to the -βος noise words discussed by Chantraine (the first parts of which are mainly onomatopoeic) since Plato noted (*Cratyl.* 427b) that the verb ὀλισθάνειν was onomatopoeic because the tongue itself glides on the lambda when it is pronounced.

¹² M. G. Tibiletti Bruno, "Un confronto Greco-Anatolico", *Athenaeum* 47 (1969) 303–312.

βος thus suppose that the word was a simple euphemism meaning essentially either “slider” or “deceiver”.

Indeed the first and most widely accepted meaning “slider” only goes to support West’s contention that a plectrum is meant in the Oxyrhynchus passage since this word, a decent euphemism for the dildo, is indeed a logical straightforward descriptive term for a type of plectrum slid along the strings. West’s quite plausible insight may perhaps be further supported by a puzzling line in Herodas’s sixth mime, in which two women discuss the dildos fabricated by a certain leather-worker named Cerdon. At one point (line 51) one of the women says that one man she knows named Cerdon “could not even stitch the plectrum for (or on?) a lyre” (οὐδ’ ἄν πλῆκτρον ἐς λύρην ράψαι). Since plectra for musical instruments would never really be stitched (as they were made, typically, out of horn, ivory, or wood, or, exceptionally, out of metal), and since elsewhere in the same dialogue Cerdon the leather-worker is said precisely to stitch dildos (lines 18–19, 43, 47, and 48), this passage seems to be evidence that πλῆκτρον was a word which was used to mean dildo, as Jacob Stern noted¹³. The word πλῆκτρον comes from the verb πλῆσσω (“to strike”) and means simply “striker”. Like ὄλισβος the “slider”, πλῆκτρον the “striker” is an appropriate euphemism for a dildo, since many expressions meaning “to hit” were used in ancient Greek to mean “to have sex with” (as in the English expression “to bang”)¹⁴. Also the plectrum could be quite baton-like and resemble a phallus¹⁵.

There are in fact two other passages which support the contention that πλῆκτρον was a word for dildo, which were cited long ago by Otto Crusius, commenting on the line in Herodas¹⁶. Juvenal in his sixth satire (383–384) says of the woman who loves music that not only does she play the lyre with the plectrum but “she grasps it, consoles herself with it, and lavishes kisses on the pleasing plectrum” (*hunc tenet, hoc se solatur, gratoque indulget basia plectro*). An even more obvious instance is to be found in Achilles Tatius’s novel *Leucippe and*

¹³ J. Stern, “Herodas Mimiamb 6”, *GRBS* 20 (1979) 247–254, at 253.

¹⁴ See Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (note 10) esp. 140–141 and 170–173.

¹⁵ For evidence on the ancient plectrum, see T. Reinach, “Lyra”, *DAGR* 3.2 (1877–1919) 1446 and W. D. Anderson, *Music and Musicians in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, London 1994) 175–176..

¹⁶ O. Crusius, *Die Mimiamben des Herondas* (Leipzig 1926) 142. Note also the golden πλῆκτρον dedicated by a prostitute in Asclep. in *Anth. Pal.* 5.203.2; in similar epigrams dildos are sometimes dedicated (see *Anth. Pal.* 6.17.1, 6.210.5, and 13.24.5).

Clitophon. In a verbal attack directed at a certain Thersander, which is specifically said to attempt to outdo the comedy of Aristophanes (8.9.1), it is stated (8.9.4) that among many other perversities of his youth he oiled himself and publicly “straddled a plectrum” (πλήκτρον [Saumaise; MSS: πλέκτρον] περιέβαινε). The same verb, περιβαίνω, is used by Aristophanes in the same sexual sense when he has Cinesias say in the *Lysistrata* (979): “she would straddle [my] exposed penis” (περὶ τὴν ψωλὴν περιβαίη). Thus since the whole attack on Thersander was said to be Aristophanic, and the verb used is a known usage of Aristophanes, it is possible that the comic poet also used the word πλήκτρον in an obscene sense in one of his lost plays. In the extant plays πλήκτρον is only found twice, and then to mean a fighting cock’s spur (*Av.* 759 and 1365). Eric Csapo has shown that the cock’s spur itself was often thought of as phallic: it could be depicted looking like a penis and its removal was considered tantamount to castration¹⁷.

It remains then an intriguing possibility that both ὄλισθος (the “slider”) and πλήκτρον (the “striker”) were originally used to designate musical implements (akin, respectively, to the modern “slide” and “pick” used in guitar playing) and later each came also to euphemistically designate the dildo, perhaps because of both their phallic shapes and their suggestive names. It is further tempting to conjecture that the application of the terms “slider” and “striker” to the dildo occurred in Old Comedy. In fact, after the possible instance in Sappho or Alcaeus discussed above, only two ancient authors are known to have used the term ὄλισθος: the Old Comedy poets Cratinus (fr. 354 K.-A. [a parody of Hdt., 8.96.2] and fr. 394 K.-A.¹⁸) and Aristophanes

¹⁷ E. Csapo, “Deep Ambivalence: Notes on a Greek Cock Fight”, *Phoenix* 47 (1993) 1–28 (with pll. 1–4) and 115–124, at 6 and 13, respectively.

¹⁸ Cratinus jokingly mentioned “narcissus-like dildos” (ναρκισσίνοι ὄλισθοι) according to Athen., *Deipn.* 15.676f (with the reading of Schweighäuser). The narcissus flower could have been used to describe a dildo because of its slenderness and length (the plant was said to be narrow [Theophr., *Hist. Pl.* 7.13.1] and sword-like [Colum., *de Rust.* 9.4.4]), its softness (note the expression ναρκίσσου τερενώτερον [“smoother than the narcissus”] at fr. mel. adesp. 25 Page (= *PMG* 943 = *Suppl. Hell.* 1028), actually considered a reference to a dildo by W. Headlam in A. D. Knox, *Herodas: The Mimes and Fragments* [Cambridge 1922] 288), or else, most plausibly, its colour (as suggested by Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique* [note 10] 736, s.v. νάρκισσος; however the name ναρκισσίτης does not refer to the stone’s colour, as he claims, but to its smell, as shown by Damigeron-Evax, *de Lapid.* 44.2). The flower is said to be white with a crocus-coloured interior in Ov., *Met.* 3.509–510 (the youth’s skin is white and red at 3.491) and Diosc., *Mat. Med.*

(*Lys.* 109¹⁹ and fr. 332.13 K.-A.). Hesychius quoted the word *ὀλισβοκόλλιξ* in his lexicon, likely taken also from a comic context (= fr. com. adesp. 397 K.-A.), perhaps again from Cratinus or Aristophanes²⁰. Wilamowitz's reading of *ὀλίσβους* for *ὀβολούς* in a speech by Hyperides (fr. 165 Jensen) is unnecessary and unconvincing, and need not detain us.

For all we know, the word *ὄλισβος* for dildo may simply have been a comic usage of Cratinus adopted by Aristophanes (more likely than the other way around because of chronological limitations). The reason we are so well-informed about the term is likely not because it was a widespread one but because of the great ancient and medieval interest in commenting on Aristophanes. In fact, there was a large number of other expressions used for the dildo in comic sources and also generally in ancient Greek, such as (excluding words generally for penis): an imitation (*μεμιμημένον* in Ar., *Lys.* 159 with Σ, and

4.158, and it is called *purpureus* in Verg., *Ecl.* 5.38 and Pliny, *H.N.* 21.75.128; more importantly, beautiful skin colour is compared to the narcissus in the novels of Achilles Tatius (*Leuc.* 1.19.1) and Nicetas Eugenianus (*Dros.* 4.127). The dildos in Herodas are said to be red (6.19 and 7.128). A reference to the Narcissus myth (as posited by A. Meineke, *Analecta critica ad Athenaei Deipnosophistas* [Leipzig 1867] 327 and P. Brandt [a.k.a. H. Licht], *Sittengeschichte Griechenlands* [Dresden, Zürich 1925–1928] vol. 3, 213–214) is unlikely, since there is no good evidence for the existence of the myth before the first century B. C. as I have shown in M. Nelson, “Narcissus: Myth and Magic”, *CJ* 95 (2000) 363–389, at 369, n. 21.

¹⁹ In this passage (and in fr. 592.16–17 K.-A.) Aristophanes may be making a veiled attack on Aspasia of Miletus, who was often treated harshly in Old Comedy, even after her death (see M. M. Henry, *Prisoner of History. Aspasia of Miletus and Her Biographical Tradition* [New York, Oxford 1995] 19–28). There is little evidence to support the notion that Aristophanes was rather providing economic information on Miletus as a notable manufacturing and/or exporting centre for dildos or providing ethnographic information about a local preponderance for the use of dildos, as often thought (see, for example, Brandt [note 18] vol. 2, 24, G. Vorberg, *Glossarium Eroticum* [Stuttgart 1932] 181 and 407, Körte [note 3] 2481, A. Krenkel, “Masturbation in der Antike”, *WZ Wilhelm-Pieck-Universität Rostock* 28 [1979] 159–178, at 167, Henderson, *Aristophanes: Lysistrata* [note 10] 81 and *The Maculate Muse* [note 10] 221, and A. H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Lysistrata* [Warminster 1990] 161).

²⁰ A. N. Oikonomides has proposed that the word *κόλλιξ*, a type of bread, was itself used to mean “penis” on the basis of a grafitto on an Attic scyphos found in Al Mina: “The ‘Bread-Stick’ of Mantios”, *Horos* 3 (1985) 130–131 and “Κόλλιξ, ὄλισβος, ὀλισβοκόλλιξ”, *Horos* 4 (1986) 168–178 (which is not very reliable in its general treatment of evidence for dildos).

note the μίμημα in Plut., *De Is. et Os.* 18 and εἰδωλον in Diod. Sic., 1.22.6), a reproduction (εἰκὼν in *Ezech.* 16.17 LXX), an instrument (ὄργανον in Ps.-Lucian, *Amor.* 28), a long cylinder and tube (μακρογύγυλος and σωλὴν in Sophr., fr. 23 K.-A.), a staff (possibly the βακτηρία in Alciphr., 4.14.2 = fr. com. adesp. 251 Kock [not in K.-A.]), an aid (ἐπικουρία in Ar., *Lys.* 110 with Σ, and see Strattis, fr. 57 K.-A.; compare English “sex aid”), a toy (possibly the παίγνιον in Lucian in *Anth. Pal.* 6.17.1, and see the ἄθλημα in *Anth. Pal.* 6.37.3; compare English “sex toy”), and the leather (σχύτινον in Ar., fr. 592.17 K.-A.²¹, and Eupol., fr. 418 K.-A. and see the δερμά in Plato Com., fr. 188.18 K.-A.) or the wicker (γέρρον [perhaps “pole” here] in Epich., fr. 226 K.-A. and possibly ταρσός/θαρσός in Callim. in *Anth. Pal.* 13.24.5²²). Aristophanes may have also used the name Ὀρθαγόρας to designate a dildo (*Eccl.* 916 with Σ)²³. Herodas, who wrote the longest extant ancient narrative on the dildo (his sixth mime), did not use the word ὄλισθος²⁴ but rather the *hapax legomenon* βαυβών (line 19), which has been thought to be derived from the goddess Βαυβώ or from βαυβάω meaning “to lull to sleep”²⁵; I would

²¹ For this fragment, see now I. Butrica, “The Lost *Thesmophoriazusae* of Aristophanes”, *Phoenix* 55 (2001) 44–76, at 72–73. At the end of line 26 of this fragment φύσιν could be read rather than the χρόαν universally restored by editors. This word is found referring to physical appearance or shape in the accusative at the end of the line also at Ar., *Nub.* 503, *Av.* 117 and 1569, and fr. 5.2 K.-A.

²² See Giangrande, “Emendations to Callimachus”, *CQ* 12 (1962) 212–222, at 218–222.

²³ See also *Eccl.* 43–45 (with Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Ecclesiazusae* [Warminster 1998] 142) and 890 with Σ (with R. G. Ussher, *Aristophanes Ecclesiazusae* [Oxford 1973] 197–198) for further possible references to dildos in this play.

²⁴ Herodas is often mistakenly said to have used this word: see, for example, Chantraine, *La formation* (note 11) 262, Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (note 10) vol. 2, pt. 1, 377, s. v. ὄλισθος, whose mistake is noted by Tibiletti Bruno, “Un confronto” (note 12) 306, n. 6, Krenkel, “Masturbation” (note 19) 167, and R. J. Finnegan, “Women in Herodian Mime”, *Hermathena* 152 (1992) 21–73, at 21.

²⁵ For Βαυβώ, see Headlam, *Herodas* (note 18) 288–289 (who considered it possible [289] that the similarity with Baubo is accidental and that the word is simply derived from the verb), Brandt, *Sittengeschichte* (note 18) vol. 2, 25 and vol. 3, 180, W. K. C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (Princeton 1952) 136, Tibiletti Bruno, “Un confronto” (note 12) 304, n. 5, Krenkel, “Masturbation” (note 19) 167 (citing other scholars), Stern, “Herodas Mimiambo 6” (note 13) 249, Maurice Olender, “Aspects of Baubo: Ancient

suggest rather perhaps from *βουβών* ("genitals"). And finally, in his seventh mime, Herodas euphemistically spoke of dildos as shoes, and perhaps also as the skin coat (*βαίτη* at line 128).

In conclusion, the word *ὄλισθος* seems to have been originally a term for a musical instrument, and only later a rare comic euphemistic term for the dildo, and by no means the *vox propria*. In fact, just as in Latin²⁶, ancient Greek had no *vox propria* for the implement.

Texts and Contexts", in D. M. Halperin, J. J. Winkler, and F. I. Zeitlin, eds., *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton 1990) 83–113, at 84, and Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (note 10) 15. For *βαυβάω*, see Headlam, *Herodas* (note 18) 288–289, Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique* (note 10) 170, s. v. *βαυβάω* (who cites Headlam), and Tibeletti Bruno, "Un confronto" (note 12) 304, n. 5.

²⁶ See A. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus* (Oxford 1992 [revised edition]) 231, n. 27. I would like to thank Martin Kilmer for inspiring and encouraging this work. For the evidence for dildos in archaic Greek red-figure uses, see his *Greek Erotica* (London 1993) 26–30, 67, 98–102, and 116–117. Some of the material in this article was presented at the Classical Association of Canada meeting in 1999.